

Lessons Learned from Graduate Students' Early Consulting Experiences

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Abstract

High quality, experiential training for graduate students entering the performance enhancement consulting field is extremely important. Silva and colleagues (1999) recently argued that students are being left to learn through trial and error, leading to mistakes, and limiting credibility. Although sharing experiences, lessons, and insight can not replace supervised experience, it is an important component of graduate students' training. The purpose of this article is to share lessons learned from graduate students' experiences in a sport psychology consulting internship setting. Lessons are discussed in terms of essentials for getting started, practical lessons for all consulting experiences, team interventions, individual consultations, and lessons based on global reflections.

Lessons Learned from Graduate Students' Early Consulting Experiences

In the field of sport psychology, it is well known that applied research has not received the same attention as academic research (Simons & Anderson, 1995). Recently Silva, Conroy, and Zizzi (1999) outlined a number of the current issues confronting the advancement of applied sport psychology. In particular, Silva and colleagues highlighted that a more proactive initiative is required in training graduate students, reiterating concerns about applied training and supervised experiences being underdeveloped. Silva et al. argued that students are being left to learn through trial and error, which is leading to a greater probability of mistakes, and limiting credibility of the profes-

sion. While the extent of this problem may be the source of some debate, few would argue the necessity of appropriate graduate training for applied work.

Durand-Bush and Bloom (2001) recently addressed and summarized the limited literature pertaining to graduate students in applied sport psychology. Some literature has addressed academic training areas such as student satisfaction with supervisors (e.g. Anderson, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 1994), other studies have looked at graduate students' career options (e.g. Waite & Pettit, 1993). Durand-Bush and Bloom provided insights based on their own experiences. They emphasized the importance of "shopping" around for a suitable graduate program and selecting courses that provide solid knowledge and skills for consulting. They

also suggest that internship opportunities should be examined for their number of supervised hours and their possibility to lead to certification. Once consulting experiences begin, Durand-Bush and Bloom outline trusting relationships and skillful knowledge as key to consultant effectiveness.

Other applied sport psychology consultants and researchers (Gould, 1998; Halliwell, 1990; Halliwell, Orlick, Ravizza, & Rotella, 1999; Holt & Streaan, 2001; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Ravizza, 1990; Rotella, 1990; Simons & Anderson, 1995) have focused on consultants' experiences, their effectiveness, and their lessons learned; however, this work is also limited. Recently, through a self-narrative research design, Holt and Streaan (2001) discussed issues related to professional training, supervision, consultant athlete relationships, and the need for reflective practice in applied sport psychology. Halliwell, Orlick, Ravizza & Rotella's (1999) "Consultant's Guide to Excellence" addressed practical issues associated with consulting in areas including getting started, delivering a program, and making a difference. Gould's (1998) chapter "Insights into effective sport psychology consulting" provided guidelines for successfully implementing an educationally based mental skills training program. His guidelines are specific to the areas of gaining entry and connection, identifying program objectives, identifying specific strategies to achieve program objectives, scheduling mental skills training, and evaluating program effectiveness. A study by Simons and Anderson (1995) compiled the personal perspectives of 11 consultants who had been practicing "in the field" for two to four decades. Perspectives were presented in the form of lessons learned and advice for newcomers. In addition, many established and recognized consultants have presented their experiences working with professional teams (Halliwell, 1990; Ravizza, 1990; Rotella, 1990), while Orlick and Partington (1987) offered a com-

prehensive analysis of athletes' perceptions of consultants' effectiveness. While all of this literature has presented solid knowledge and contributed to the advancement of the applied field, the amount of practical literature for the applied sport psychologist remains minimal. Furthermore, with the exception of Holt and Streaan's (2001) article, all of these papers have been written by experienced consultants. While their lessons are beneficial for others to learn from, they are the lessons of experienced consultants, rather than those of beginning consultants.

The purpose of this article is to share lessons learned from graduate students' experiences in a sport psychology consulting internship setting. There are many essential components to applied sport psychology graduate students' training. We believe that supervised experience is essential. While there is clearly no replacement for supervision from an experienced consultant, given that many graduate students are not being provided with such, we believe our knowledge is worth sharing, as learning with and from colleagues and peers was one of our greatest lessons as consultants-in-training.

Our Internship Experience

In the fall of 2000 seven of us began the first year of our masters' program at the University of Ottawa. We quickly realized the uniqueness of the group, having just arrived from all parts of Canada, the Caribbean, and the United Kingdom, with backgrounds in psychology, human kinetics, coaching and teaching. During the fall term we read a great deal of applied literature through our coursework, enrolled in a micro-counseling course, and discussed many topics in our intervention seminar. Prior to beginning our internship, we experienced the fears and anxieties that most graduate students face prior to embarking on a consulting career. The possibility of influencing an athlete's performance, outlook, and approach to their sport was concerning, but through the winter term

we overcame our self-doubts, and one by one we began our consulting experiences.

Our intervention contexts were extremely diverse, as we worked with teams and individual athletes ranging from youth to master athletes, and recreational to elite level athletes. Sports included hockey, badminton, soccer, road racing, track and field, swimming, cross-country, basketball, triathlon, golf, tennis, football, cross-country skiing, and power-lifting. Each of us completed a minimum 360 hours required for credit, while some of us exceeded this requirement. Throughout the internship, we had an excellent support system, with a committed supervision program, as well as eager classmates constantly wanting to discuss and debrief early consulting experiences. We came to develop an enhanced comprehension of consulting and intervention, while fostering a much better understanding of our own strengths and weaknesses. Now, as we continue in the field, we are increasingly aware of how valuable it was to have had such comprehensive training and such diverse opportunities. It is for this reason that we are sharing our lessons.

While these lessons are based on personal experiences, we believe that they can be beneficial for all graduate students beginning applied work in sport psychology, and may also be of interest to experienced consultants and supervisors in the field. Although between us we could list hundreds of lessons, we have chosen to focus on the lessons that we believe are particularly pertinent to beginning consultants, as well as the lessons shared most commonly among us. These lessons have been categorized into five areas:

- essentials for getting started,
- lessons for all consulting experiences
- lessons from team interventions
- lessons from individual consultations
- lessons based on global reflections.

Essentials for Getting Started

To begin, we have outlined the five lessons from our experiences that we believe are most important for all consultants at any time, and particularly essential for consultants who are getting started. Being confident, developing a rapport, learning the language, keeping it simple, and being present have been addressed to some degree in the literature already (Durand-Bush & Bloom, 2001; Gould, 1998; Halliwell, 1990; Halliwell, Orlick, Ravizza, & Rotella, 1999; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Ravizza, 1990; Rotella, 1990; Simons & Anderson, 1995) however, we are reiterating them, as they were key lessons for us in our early experiences

1. Be confident. Halliwell, Orlick, Ravizza & Rotella (1999) suggest that quality consultants “project [their] commitment and confidence” (p. 31). The importance of consultant confidence cannot be undermined. When starting out in this profession, and even once we began to establish ourselves as consultants, there were times when we had self-doubts. “Lack of confidence” experiences tend to snowball. Athletes can tell if you are lacking confidence, and consequently have less interest in what you have to say. You must believe that you have learned the important elements of mental training and that you can help to facilitate positive change in people’s lives. Of course, you will always have more to learn, as the best consultants never stop learning, but do not be afraid to acknowledge that you already do possess many of the skills necessary to be an effective consultant.

2. Develop a rapport. We quickly discovered that making a good connection with athletes was a priority. We found that regardless of the skills we might possess, we were almost useless if athletes did not find us approachable and trustworthy. In a team setting, a conscious effort is required to meet, interact, and open the lines of communication with each individual

athlete early in the season. “Hanging out” before or after practice, and chatting over a meal or while driving to a game provide opportunities to enhance the athletes-consultant relationship. When working with individual athletes, we found that early attendance at a competition helped to build rapport.

3. Learn the language. We realized immediately that without comfort and knowledge of the athletes’ sports, we were not credible; however, we learned that this education process could be fun. We went to games and competitions with friends who knew the sport and exhausted them with questions. We were keen Olympic viewers, eager fans of professional sports, and tried new sports ourselves, as part of “the job”!

4. Keep it simple. As eager beginner consultants, we sometimes caught ourselves trying to do too much (e.g. race planning, goal setting, and imagery in one session). We found that targeting one area at a time was most beneficial to the athletes, as they had difficulty making gains if quality time was not granted to an area. At times, we also found ourselves “over-analyzing” situations or individuals. We discovered that it took skill to break ideas into simple and practical terms, but that simplifying usually provided clarity and focus, especially when an athlete was confronting obstacles.

4. Be present. Also due to our keenness and eagerness, we often felt the need to be doing something. With time we learned that our background presence was far more effective than “in your face” intervention. In essence, we came to realize that we were “doing” something simply by being present. As Halliwell & colleagues (1999) state, “it is best to be low profile with high impact” (p. 52).

Practical Lessons for all Consulting Experiences

In extending what we feel are the essentials for getting started, the following are lessons and strategies that we feel are practical for all consulting experiences.

1. Use mental skills yourself. Leading by example was a major part of our consulting philosophies. Skills such as distraction control, visualization, refocusing, and maintaining a positive outlook were key to our successful consulting experiences. Halliwell and colleagues (1999) also emphasize this point, suggesting that it is important to “be a good model of what you are teaching” (p. 47).

2. Don’t create issues if none exist. As beginner consultants we were sometimes so eager to help athletes that we occasionally believed athletes were facing obstacles or challenges when in fact they were not. It is difficult as sport psychology consultants not to form beliefs and expectations about certain individuals based on past experiences, however such expectations can have dangerous consequences, and led us to make false judgements about athletes. It is important to enter consulting with an open mind, as each situation is unique.

3. Be careful with homework. While homework is a good way to stimulate athlete reflection and monitor progress, we found that focusing too much on homework turned some athletes off. We learned to be weary of this and to respect different learning styles, as some people like to write and read to learn while others prefer to listen or verbally interact to learn. Rotella (1990) echoed these concerns, stating that he avoided all types of psychological testing. In attempts to limit athletes’ paper work, we used primarily post-event evaluation forms, comprised of concise and relevant questions, a strategy also suggested by Halliwell and colleagues (1999). In addition, we found that pa-

per work was almost always a struggle to get back from athletes. If a form was “required”, we had athletes fill it in during a session rather than sending it home.

Lessons from Team Interventions

Given the great differences in consulting contexts, we chose to address the lessons learned from team and individual settings separately. The following are the lessons and strategies we adapted when working in team settings.

1. *Be prepared.* We found that with preparation, the quality of delivery increased. While having back-up plans and being organized for every session took time, our efforts were always evident in the quality of our work.

2. *Ask athletes what they want.* In a team context, it is often the coach who has brought you in to work with the team, and therefore it is the coach’s ideas with which you are familiar. It is important to know where the athletes are coming from: what they believe to be their strengths, weaknesses, concerns, and how they see your role. Reassessment throughout the season is also important. Ask them, “How are we doing on this? How can we do better? Have our goals changed?” Also, have them complete a midseason consultant evaluation, so you know how you can be more effective for the remainder of the season. Several other authors (e.g. Durand-Bush, 2001; Gould, 1998; Rotella, 1990) have emphasized the importance of regular “checks” with the athletes, ongoing feedback from the athletes, and program evaluation.

3. *When working with young teams...* As beginner consultants we were recommended and thus selected to work a great deal with recreational, club, and league level athletes. We found these groups provided us with completely different experiences than higher level athletes. A specific challenge we encountered

frequently with young athletes was their lack of attention, despite their genuine interest in our presentation. We developed a number of strategies for this, including a talking tool (e.g. hockey puck), the use of practical activities and demonstrative games, and breaking into smaller groups.

4. *Everyone’s presentation style is unique.* It is important not to be so caught up in modeling a mentor’s style and following the “rules of consulting”, that you forget to be yourself. Learn from your mentors and be aware of the rules of consulting, but do not let this take you away from acting naturally. Everyone’s unique personality brings unique strengths to their work with athletes.

5. *Working with coaches...* We quickly learned the importance of having the support and trust of the coach. Some of us worked with coaches whose values differed from ours, which was very challenging. Recognition of our different views often facilitated communication, but we did not find any approach to offer a perfect solution. Halliwell (1990) and Ravizza (1990) have also given attention to the welcome challenge of meeting athletes’ needs while maintaining a positive working relationship with coaches. Ravizza suggests monitoring the time spent with athletes versus coaches, and making a conscious effort to “hang out” in places where informal interaction with athletes is most likely to occur.

6. *Athlete confidentiality...* Despite being clear with coaches from the beginning about our obligation to respect athlete confidentiality, we regularly encountered coaches who challenged this, an obstacle also highlighted by Durand-Bush and Bloom (2001). A few strategies we found to facilitate potentially awkward situations were to be prepared for coaches’ “How are they or What did you talk about” questions, following a meeting. In certain circumstances we asked the athlete, “Is this something that we

could share with Coach, or would you rather keep it between you and I?”

Lessons from Individual Consultations

1. Let them lead. While education sometimes plays a role in consulting, we learned to be wary not to abuse the teacher/leader role. Learning about what was driving the athlete and what they felt they needed was most important. We learned to start where the athletes were, and let them take the lead. We probed them into self-discovery, while being cautious of “over-guiding”. Athletes seemed to gain the most through active learning and empowerment, as this increased their confidence and belief in themselves.

2. Don’t “jump the gun”. As beginner consultants, we were sometimes so eager to solve problems that we “jumped the gun” on intervention. We wanted to provide all the answers at that moment. We came to recognize the importance of learning as much as possible about an athlete before trying to provide them with direction. We also found e-mail useful if we had any further ideas, questions or suggestions following a session.

3. Good questions. Patient answers. Good consultants ask good questions... They also wait to hear the answers. We found that in order to learn about athletes, we had to ask them challenging questions; however, we sometimes forgot that challenging questions require time for thought and reflection. Eventually, we learned to be comfortable with silence, and to give athletes this time. Initially however, we found the “seven-second rule” useful: after asking a question, we would count to seven slowly in our head, giving the athlete the opportunity to think about the question and develop a response. Halliwell, Orlick, Ravizza & Rotella (1999) emphasize a similar message, suggest-

ing that consultants “ask pertinent questions” (p. 33) and “be the greatest listeners [they] can be” (p. 15).

Lessons Based on Global Reflections

Finally, we have compiled our lessons based on global reflections of our internship experiences. These are lessons that we came to develop only after hundreds of hours of experience as young consultants, and are lessons that we feel are key to maximizing our effectiveness throughout our careers. Each of the lessons, including being ready for teachable moments, expecting the unexpected, acknowledging that everyone’s different, determining our role as consultants, and knowing our special place are lessons that have been addressed by others (Durand-Bush & Bloom, 2001; Halliwell, 1990; Halliwell, Orlick, Ravizza & Rotella, 1999; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Simons & Anderson, 1995). We feel there is benefit in sharing our unique perspective of these lessons.

1. Be ready for teachable moments. We have learned never to be inconvenienced by athletes asking questions or sharing concerns at seemingly inopportune times. In fact, we have come to realize that the “advice” given in these situations should be taken most seriously, as you are clearly addressing a real concern of the athlete’s. Although unpredictable, being open to these moments is imperative. Furthermore, as Halliwell (1990) emphasizes, it is important to be aware of cues from athletes that indicate they would like to talk.

2. Expect the unexpected. Flexibility is considered a distinguishing characteristic of “great” consultants (Orlick & Partington, 1987). The importance of being prepared, flexible, and adaptable cannot be overstated, particularly in performance situations. While outcomes cannot always be planned for, an appropriate response to whatever happens on the court or playing field is essential.

3. *Everyone's different.* Differences exist in age, gender, sport, level, and of course, from one individual to the next. We found that it was important to be aware of these differences when addressing a new group. We had to remind ourselves that all athletes work at different speeds, and learn at different rates. Given that all consultants are also unique, it is natural for a consultant to find it easier to relate to certain groups or individuals. However, a good consultant will make an effort to relate in positive ways with every group and individual.

4. *One piece of the puzzle or part of the everyday process?* As graduate students, we were eager to undertake any internship experience offered to us, and to be as involved as possible. We need these experiences to grow and become competent. Now that we are professionals in the field, our priorities have evolved to include making a living and keeping some balance in our lives. Consulting requires a lot of time and energy to be done effectively, and it is impossible to be everything to everyone. Before beginning consulting work, particularly with a team, it is important to be clear and up front about your level of involvement. While it can be very exciting to be “part of the everyday process”, on board with a team, a consultant's role sometimes requires providing only “one piece of the puzzle”. While both circumstances can be very rewarding, being “part of the everyday process” requires a much more significant commitment of time and energy. If this is your profession, proper compensation must be assured for such a large commitment. We have also found that in order to avoid being “spread too thin” and losing effectiveness, we must turn down some consulting requests. Most experienced consultants agree whole-

heartedly; as Halliwell (1990) suggests, “it is important to keep proper balance in [your] life”.

5. *Know that special place.* Our role as sport psychology consultants is very important, and requires a careful balance of behaviors. We must be present, but not overly present. We must be prepared for lots of “sit and wait” time, and be sure that we take time for ourselves. It is important to develop a good relationship with the athletes, but we must not cross the lines of professionalism (Durand-Bush & Bloom, 2001; Simons & Anderson, 1995). Indeed, it is a delicate balance, but once you find your “special place”, it is a rewarding role.

Summary

There a need for additional literature in applied sport psychology, particularly pertaining to high quality consultant education. We have attempted to make a contribution to this domain, by sharing our lessons, which were gained through our positive experiences as graduate students in a structured and supervised internship program. It is our hope that important issues concerning quality graduate training in performance enhancement and applied sport psychology will be given adequate attention in universities and training centers around the world. Until then, we believe that this article will help other graduate students avoid some mistakes often made by ‘beginning consultants’. Although our lessons are based entirely on early consulting experiences, we believe that our knowledge and insight may also benefit experienced consultants and consultant supervisors.

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